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Seat belts are becoming the reality

Seat belts are becoming the reality on more and more of our nation's school buses and regardless of every effort from the industry, their related associations and government industry agencies can muster to stop this safety device installed.

Five states - New York, New Jersey, Louisiana, Florida and California - now require lap or three-point shoulder belts on their big school buses.

In June 2007, Gov. Rick Perry signed into law a requirement that all school buses in Texas must be equipped with seat belts after Sept. 1, 2010.

New York State law requires that large school buses manufactured after July 1, 1987 is equipped with seat belts. Children under the age of four riding on school buses must ride in federally certified child safety seats. School bus drivers are required to wear their seat belts. Each school district sets its own policy on seat belt use. About 36,000 school buses were equipped with belts by 1998.

Belts became a non-issue in New Jersey since required installation after 1992 with some sixteen thousand school buses equipped with seat belts by 1998.

Over 700 school districts have seat belts installed on their school buses. Some school districts in states using belts but not mandated include Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oklahoma Vermont and Virginia.

Some experts and parents consider seat belts to provide certain benefits

Based on 2safeschools studying this issue ongoing since 1999:

Concern at these 700+ school districts exist not only with protecting children during a crash but also reducing the number of crashes due to bus driver distraction; reducing the number of injuries during the routine operation of the school bus; as well as properly training children to 'buckle-up' in any vehicle they might ride.

"No rule, but Chicago does it" -- Mandate or no mandate, the Chicago Public Schools have had seat belts on buses since 1975, spokesman Mike Vaughn said, "It makes students safer." (July 24, 2007, Chicago Sun-Times)

The Newton (Mass.) city's School Committee voted unanimously to mandate seat belts in 2002. The new bus contract called for 40 new 77-passenger school buses with factory-installed seat belts. The vote came as a result of a School Committee reexamination of bus safety following the April 27 rollover bus crash in New Brunswick, Canada that killed four Oak Hill middle school student who were on a school field trip.

These states school districts apparently solved the installation costs, evacuation issues and the other arguments promoted against seat belts.

2safeschools noticed a hidden issue early in our study that is rarely mentioned

The problem of inconsistent use of seat belts at some school districts consistently points to inadequate driver training, sabotaged bus driver authority, poor bus safety policies, including ineffective school staff support toward helping the bus driver keep the bus environment a calm, safe place for children and a hostile free workplace for their school bus drivers.

This may be reflected in a recent Washington Post story: "Fairfax County began adding seat belts to its school bus fleet in the late 1980s but phased them out within a few years because many students did not wear them." ~ School Board Approves Plan For Seat Belts In New Buses, The Washington Post, January 10, 2008

Those that can understand ineffective support can also see an opportunity to witness just how sloppy some schools really are at helping their bus drivers keep kids safe. Where transportation providers and schools permit out-of-control and defiant children to ride their buses, then vandalism and misuse of the belts as weapons is a real and costly expectation.

Regardless, the reality is that Lunch boxes used as weaponry still seems to prevail over seat belt weaponry, even these days. (See July National Highway Transportation Safety Administration's (NHTSA) "Public Hearing on Seatbelts."

Who really is in charge of those school buses? Too often at some school districts it simply does not seem to be the adults involved.

Better informed parents consider no school bus, equipped or not equipped with seat belts, a safe school bus where the properly trained school bus driver is not the authority in charge of his or her school bus and where the bus driver is not receiving effective student management and violence prevention support from school staff.

Cost may be another invalid concern in the case against seat belts on America's school buses

The industry and friends of the industry usual arguments against seat belts on the big school buses are virtually identical arguments used against seat belts in U.S. automobiles during the 1950's. The cost early on was \$300.00 per school bus.

Quality adjusted life was not an issue in those days, but like today, money was. The school bus was promoted against by Ford Motors as a actually a 'truck' intended to transport cargo. This apparently was in an effort to reduce liability issues involving the transportation of schoolchildren. Even today precious lives continue to be referred to as 'precious cargo.'

More recent presentations involving the cost of seat belts on the school buses refer to cost-benefit analysis, per quality-adjusted life years saved, and so on.

"Some cost-benefit analysis on this issue has shown that installing seat belts on school buses is not cost-effective. The Partnership for Prevention published a report in 2001 to help state legislators understand the purpose and uses of cost-effectiveness analysis. According to this group, interventions costing no more than \$25,000 to \$75,000 per quality-adjusted life years saved or per life year saved are considered to be cost effective.

-3- Quality-adjusted life is a measure that adjusts years of life based on quality. The cost per life year saved for installing seat belts on school buses is estimated to be almost \$3 million, which is not cost effective, according to the Partnership for Prevention guideline." (Occupant Protection on School Buses)

According to Jim Suk, a trial attorney working exclusively in the area of personal injury law since 2001 and has been named as one of Minnesota's "Super Lawyers" each year in personal injury law by Minnesota Law & Politics magazine - says that:

The US Department of Transportation will spend \$3 million to save one life with road improvements.

The EPA will spend \$6.1 million to save one life from arsenic in drinking water.

"All you have to do is know one family that goes through the devastation of the loss of a child, you'll do everything in your power to ensure that all of the vehicles that your kids get on have seat belts." ~ Former National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) chairman Jim Hall quote in a Nov 21, 2006 NewsChannel 5 story, 'Bus Crash Revives Debate Over Seat Belts.'

It is our purpose at 2safeschools to help save one life. According to the NHTSA own findings at least one life each year would have been saved had seat belts been installed on America's school buses.

Another likely fallacy: Seat belts reduce capacity

Although seat belts are promoted to reduce capacity, there is no loss in capacity where lap belts are installed.

Arthur L. Yeager, an expert on seat belt use in New Jersey, where 16,000 school buses were equipped with seat belts by 1998, rejects the reduced capacity assumption. "Those with actual experience with the 3-point belts reported an actual

increase in seating capacity for middle school and high school children. These children are currently assigned two to a seat, four across and now the buses can accommodate five across - a 25% increase in capacity. Fewer buses and less cost!"

NHTSA may have warned in the past that adding the belts could be expensive, reduce seating capacity and reduce ridership. What is missing in these more recent stories is the new SafeGuard FlexSeat™ that can safely transport three elementary school children or two high school kids on a standard 39-inch seat. This innovative bus seat with three lap-shoulder belts resolves capacity issues and enhances bus safety with its unique approach to maintaining compartmentalization. With the FlexSeat, one seat fits all. With SmartFrame, the FlexSeat observes the full spirit of FMVSS 222 compartmentalization. Even an unrestrained child receives full compartmentalization protection, regardless of whether the child in front is restrained. (FlexSeat Information: http://www.safeguardseat.com/bus/products_flex.htm)

Were cost an actual issue, then overengineering would likely be avoided

All this attention on the more complicated 3-point belt systems and their cost may be nothing more than another way to discourage use through over engineering. Higher back seats and three-points may solve some problems in the rare event of a crash but create others. The bus driver can not see the children or their activities as well, increasing the possibility of more frequent events involving missing students on board, bullying, hidden assaults, which may also include an increase in sexual assaults.

Had the industry not made everyone so paranoid over lap belts on the big school buses it would still be considered safe to install these simple devices for children to use, in my opinion. My first person experience with these devices would indicate lap belts remain an acceptable option.

The reality is that behind the scenes last year 28-percent of IC Corporation's, the nation's largest integrated school bus manufacture, new school bus production in the U.S. were factory installed with seat belts -- 25-percent with lap belts; 3-percent with 3-point belts.

So where is all the actual brain, neck and back injuries that these safety devices are supposed to cause?

Those injuries and also ejection's occur on the school buses not equipped with seat belts and often during side impact and low speed rollover crashes, not just at high speeds, and not on seat belt equipped school buses where use is also required.

Change is welcomed

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) recently claimed that they never said seat belts should not be installed on the school buses. This turn of conviction away from such claims of doom and despair and destruction in state directors presentations and graphs promoting horrific brain, neck and back injuries that some seat belts can cause may be a result of seeing the writing on the wall, per say, and wanting to place themselves on the winning side of this issue.

That apparent change in course is welcomed where it is the actual case. We can all be winners, but more importantly keeping children safe on the buses are the ones that the earn the ultimate trophy – our nation's school bus drivers.

We ought not to forget that reality no matter what our views concerning this issue.

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The purpose of 2safeschools is to save one child's life

Please note that 2safeschools and our 100-percent volunteer membership is not an advocacy association. Although individual members certainly are free to express their personal opinions, neither 2safeschools nor its membership efforts advocates for or against seat belts on school buses. Information has been collected since 1999 concerning this issue for the purpose of providing views not often presented in the press.